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Letter to the Editor ARQ

Richard Coyne, The University of Edinburgh

A grey area

I take the point made by Sebastian Macmillan that it serves architectural academics, researchers and practitioners no good purpose to assert how different and special architecture is, as if architecture should be treated differently in relation to research assessment. As a further indication of how un-different we are it is worth noting that the same claim to difference is often made from within other disciplines.

Much of the discussion focuses on funding models, and the apparent lack of recognition by funders and institutions of the need to adequately support our various disciplines. Senior academic managers who represent those disciplines are cautious about claims for special treatment, especially in these times of stringency, fearing that if a discipline is so different, and so expensive, then it will be told that the university cannot afford to keep it.

Disciplines have to understand each other better. The format of the impending REF (Research Assessment Framework) is forcing attention on increased understanding, as departments re-align themselves ready for to present their case in 2013 (or whenever it will be). For example, in the 2008 RAE, Architecture and Built Environment disciplines were assessed independently from Town Planning, which was assessed by a different subpanel. In the REF a single panel will probably inspect both. Any institution that covers these areas will already be thinking about whether to combine submissions, and even genuinely to pool resources and to work together on research projects leading up to the REF. Art and Design might think of combining with History of Art and Architecture for similar reasons. Drama and Music face similar choices. The creative arts are not the only ones moving towards new marriages. Theology and Philosophy face similar choices.

A positive outcome of strategizing for the REF is the need to think about pooling research activity and resources between disciplines and across institutions. The REF will also involve a closer inspection of how disciplines treat the auditing of creative outputs as research.

The issue of outputs (other than texts) to which Sebastian alludes is not unique to architecture, but is a hot issue in art and design, media studies, music and performance, any of which may intersect with other disciplines in the humanities, and those outside. In fact the research funding councils have been encouraging such explorations, and the generation of outputs that are often most readily associated with the new research term, "impact."

The recent HEFCE report on the REF consultation introduces a new confluence of terms, identifying the eligibility of "'grey literature' and practice-based outputs" for inclusion in portfolios of evidence for assessment of research quality. "Grey literature" here refers to working documents, pre-prints and other written material not generally available through publication outlets. In the age of the Internet the rules for what counts as research output are ever changing.

The funding councils emphasize diverse modes of research output, collaborations, cross-disciplinarity, and in harsher economic times there will have to be some banding together anyway. Hopefully the de-Balkanization will be good for architecture, for research, and those for whom architectural research will be of consequence. The REF represents a call to unity, or at least new alliances, and new configurations.